

Zhang Xianqing: *Government, Family Clans and Catholicism: A Historical Narration of the Catholic Church in Rural Fu-an in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Co., May, 2009, 344 pp. ISBN: 978-7-101-06652-4, Religious and Chinese Society Studies series  
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The fortune of Christianity as a foreign religion in China is very different from that of Buddhism. When Buddhism was first introduced to China, it was somewhat like people of different races coming together. Although they speak different languages, cherish different ideas, and have different customs, they merge after some simple contact and communication. The religion originated in India seems to be a religion of the Chinese people themselves because in this religion there is me in you and you in me. When the Chinese people see Buddhist temples or monks, none of them will ever say that they are “foreign” or “alien”. But Christianity is a different story. The first time it reached China, it was thought to be the Nestorianism from Persia, that is to say, it is an “import” and known consequently as the “three foreign religions in the Medieval China” together with the Manicheanism and Zoroastrianism. Since that time, Christianity in China, modified by such adjectives as “barbarian”, “alien” and “foreign”, etc., has existed in the country for more than one thousand years, leaving behind a history of the Christian mission in China with some unique Chinese characteristics, namely, the communications and clashes between the Chinese and Western civilizations, accommodation and adjustment, fusion and understanding. During the Ming and Qing period, Jesuit missionaries represented by Matteo Ricci adopted a variety of strategies such as the “integration of Catholicism with Confucianism and the use of Catholicism to complement and benefit Confucianism” in an attempt to adapt the Christian religion to the local mainstream culture. In order to gain acceptance by the Chinese populace, Matteo Ricci even wore a Buddhist monk frock in person, thinking that this attire might help him win the favoured treatment accorded to the monks in ancient China. But Ricci failed in his attempt. The “others” are others and the “others” can never become “us”. How to understand the conflict between the “others” and “us” during the history of the Catholic mission in the Ming and Qing dynasties in China has thus become a dilemma. For the people of today, those who do not know it try their best to understand it, but those who know it lament at the scarcity of historical information, for history, after all, is history and what is bygone is bygone. It is very difficult for us to have the features of history completely restored. During the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, there were very few people who were interested in the “others”. Except for the few scarce records left by some far-sighted intellectuals who held a favourable attitude toward the “others”, there are few words about them in the orthodox Ming and Qing historical documents. However, it is possible to have that part of history repaired because it lasted for only one or two hundred years. Firstly, as it is a conflict between the two parties, the “others”, holding an advantage in terms of time, have left behind a lot of static historical records and materials about the events that took place two hundred years ago. On the other hand, the “us”, by holding an advantage in terms of space, have retained the scenes where the two parties conducted their activities at the time. The different roles and scenes are under constant changing since they are dynamic. Without the latter, the history of the Catholic Church at the turn of the Ming and Qing dynasties would have lost its foundation of existence. It is due to the conditions of time and space provided by the two parties concerned that make it possible for us to repair that part of the history. However, the possibility of repair does not necessarily mean that it can indeed be repaired. Since the 1930s, historians and historiographers have been trying to have that part of history repaired and restored. Currently, what people see are works mainly by religious insiders, for example, *A General Survey of the Catholic Mission in China* (zhong guo tian zhu jiao chuan jiao shi gai lun) and *A Study of the Spread of Catholicism in China* (tian zhu jiao chuan xing zhong guo kao) by Hsü Tsung-tse (1886-1947, with Joseph as his Christian name, a descendent of Hsu Kuang-ch’I [1562–1633]). Works by non-Christian scholars are represented by “A Study of Catholicism on the Basis of Non-religious Canons and Classics in the Late Ming

and Early Qing Dynasties” published by Mr. Chen Yuan (1880-1971). The paper found a wealth of treasures from the tit-bits of records by those interested in the “others”. Although from the perspective of research in the history of the Catholic Church in the Ming and Qing dynasties in China, the paper is only a fragment, it has won wide acclaim from the academic circle. This indicates that the “us” have their advantage in time too. The only difference is that it is still an uncarved piece of jade. The Western scholars generally believe that their Chinese counterparts began to study the history of the Christian religion in China by “focusing on China” in the 1980s, but the paper of Mr. Chen Yuan has proved that this paradigm or strategy of study actually started more than one hundred years earlier. Chinese scholars might have continued to follow Mr. Chen Yuan’s strategy in their research had it not been for the foreign invasions and internal troubles. Few scholars had any interest in the study of Catholicism for the simple reason that academic research can not save China. After the founding of new China, it is hard for Christianity not to be associated with the cultural invasion launched by the imperialist countries since it is often modified by such adjectives as “alien”, “foreign” and “Western”. During the so-called Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards pushed the campaign to shatter the “four olds” of society, namely, old ideas, old cultures, old habits, and old customs of China to its zenith, and under such a political environment, it is hard for Christianity to get rid of its misfortune of being “one of the olds”.

The opening up and reform policy initiated in 1978 has brought about a new change in the Chinese academic world. The study of the history of Catholicism in the Ming and Qing dynasties was chosen as a break-through point. As a result, Matteo Ricci turned out to be one of the first Jesuit missionaries who has received positive treatment. Since then, the study of Matteo Ricci and the study of other Jesuit missionaries have become a “vogue” in the circle of Chinese historians and historiographers. However, the researches in the initial period are nothing but making up the lost time in research. When China was about to go global and when the world was about to come to China, the study of the Catholic mission in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties became a topic of common interest in both the East and West. After the academic circle in the West had replaced their “Europe-centred” research strategy with a new “China-centred” one, their Chinese counterparts, left far behind in the field, still remained in the state of describing what the “others” did in China. Most of the research works in the 1980s are a waste because they only argue whether the missionaries are “cultural invaders” or not. From the perspective of today, they are of no academic value at all. But on the other hand, such studies have breached the forbidden zone of academic research, scholars subsequently are not afraid to engage in studies in this field any more. From the 1990s onward, the study of the Catholic mission in the late Ming and early Qing period has been a hot topic for master’s or doctoral candidate’s thesis or dissertation at universities. A lot of weighty and significant papers and scholarly books came to the fore, and made up the deficit of research in a short period of about ten years. Without the ideological constraints any more, the researchers are able to make new breakthroughs in both research strategies and the collection of materials in both Chinese and foreign languages. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the study of the Catholic mission at the turn of the Ming and Qing dynasties has gone further in depth, and the research capabilities of a new generation of scholars have emerged on the basis of their hard work. Standing at the forefront of the current researches both at home and abroad, they have expanded their field of research with new perspectives and research methods. Their greatest difference with the previous researchers lies in that they have the chance to select their research topics together with their foreign counterparts, changing the past practice of research in which the Chinese and foreign scholars work separately without informing each other. Today, the Chinese scholars either use their own superiority in research to make up for the deficiency on the part of foreign researchers, or use the latest research findings of foreign scholars to enrich their own studies, complementing and promoting each other. The recent publication by the Zhonghua Book Co. of Zhang Xianqing’s book entitled *Government, Family Clans and Catholicism: A Historical Narration of the Catholic Church in Rural Fu-an in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries* is a good illustration.

Words such as “government”, “family clans” and “Catholicism” reveal immediately to us the motivation of the author. As the past researches are, more often than not, inclined to treat the relationship between the “others” and “us” as that between the “religion” and “society”, this book has made a greater step forward than the previous research findings which only study the “others” for others’ sake and the “us” for us’s sake. From a new perspective, the author has broken down the “us” from the abstract “society” into two concrete layers, that is, “government” and “family clans”. “Government” is the nucleus of social operation and management, whereas family clans are one of the cells of society, representing a group of people under certain circumstances. “Government” and “family clans” constitute the major framework of society, in which the “others” defined by the author, namely, the Catholic Church, operated. The subtitle of the book has defined the period of history of the Catholic mission in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties under the study as between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, with the rural society at Fu’an in Eastern Fujian as the focal place. Fu’an is the place in which the Sino-Western controversy over rites originated. As the sparkle of fire started from there, so did the dispute between the Society of Jesus and the Mendicant Orders. In spite of the ban of Christianity imposed by Emperors Yung-cheng, Ch’ien-lung, Kia K’ing and Tao-kwang for well over one hundred years, the Dominican Order, by taking refuge at Fu’an, survived. The Catholic missionaries at Fu’an at the turn of the Ming and Qing dynasties constitute a representative epitome of the history of the Catholic Church in China. The “others”, that is, the Spanish Dominican Order, have left us with a wealth of historical evidence while the “us”, that is, the “government” and “family clans” in Fu-an county, have left us with the old stage for historical activities. Neither of the two preconditions could be left out. Mr. Zhang Xianqing, the author of the book, not only knows Spanish well, but also has conducted field investigations in Fu’an. From the perspective of multi-disciplinary integration, by carefully combining the “others” with the “us”, and by joining the anthropological research strategy with that of the historical study, the author has reversed the trend in which historical research emphasizes historical documents while neglecting social investigations. By employing the form of historical narration, the author has successfully deduced and recreated the vivid scenes of historical activities carried out by the Catholic missionaries in Fu-an at the turn of the Ming and Qing dynasties. He has delineated and reconstructed the historical process of domestication of Christianity in the South-eastern region in China in a careful, accurate, vivid and convincing manner. Under the pen of the author, the adjectives such as “barbarian”, “foreign”, “alien” and “Western” used by the Chinese to modify Christianity have disappeared. The non-Chinese religion has become a local religious faith. To the family clans in Fu-an county, belief in Catholicism is an internal matter within the clans, which in themselves are the most inexpensive “preachers”. These clan preachers do not submit to the compulsory teachings of outsiders, neither can they be banned by the government. Similarly, the spread of the Catholic mission in Fu-an, contrary to what the people who have made studies in the history of the Catholic Church in China in the recent past stress, indicates that Catholicism does not necessarily have to adapt itself to the Confucian culture for survival. The author’s unconventional research does not intentionally require that people must accept this or oppose that. As a researcher in the field of history, he follows only one rule, that is, to say what is true based on the historical facts. This is easily said than done, of course. However, since the author is a meticulous, hard working person, he has captured what the others have failed to capture, or he has regarded as treasures what the others see as insignificant things. As to what to say and how to say about the historical facts, it depends on the historiographic and theoretic foundations of the author. The preciousness of historical research lies in its innovation, which simply means, to say what the others have never said. Although the background of the book is only a small county, what the book has conveyed is the information that scholars in the field of Catholic studies both in China and abroad, including some first rate experts, would most like to read and know. Whether as readers or as researchers, people have long been fed up with those unsubstantial, parroting, repetitive or useless works. The publication of Zhang Xianqing’s book declared to people all over the world that it has jumped out of this abnormal circle.

As a result, the Chinese historians have accorded it with fair treatment, rating it as one of the hundred best dissertations by doctoral candidates in the People's Republic of China.

As a supervisor of the author when he was working on his master's thesis, I am, like the other readers, very happy to see the publication of this book. If ever I am any different from the general readers, it is that I have had the chance to witness in person the growth and development of the author. I have seen in him the lively, explorative and innovative spirit of the younger generation of scholars. And I hope that the publication of Zhang Xianqing's book is a beginning and more such books will follow. If such is the case, it will be lucky for our academic world indeed.

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Translated by Guo Yidun from the Chinese original